

■ VISUAL ARTS

Review: Milam's Journey

A life honestly lived

by Elizabeth Brinton

Milam's Journey, an installation piece by Texas artist Nancy O'Connor, now showing at the University of Oregon Museum of Art, is quite a journey indeed. The viewer is called upon to carry a cassette player and to listen to the voice of Milam (a poor, elderly black man from Texas), to read his story from writings hung on the wall, to view photographs of his face, and to contemplate objects from his environment . . . all simultaneously.

Nancy O'Connor, the creator of this multi-media journey, studied filmmaking and journalism in Texas. The show is her attempt to capture the story of Milam's life and times before it disappears. The show, a blend of art, journalism, and history, is also an innovation in recording.

The installation contains seven glass cases which set off the gathered and re-created objects and parts of Milam's poor, but dignified life. While viewing the objects and reading Milam's long and religious ramblings, the viewer is expected to take in a rather lengthy tape recording of Milam's recollections and philosophies.

Some of the glass case installations are beautiful. One, filled with a thicket of grey-pink dogwood branches, connects nicely with Milam's writings about the cross of Christianity and the dogwood tree. Other pieces are nice, but don't convey the messages of Milam's life so cleanly or so accessibly.

The show requires a good deal of time and concentration. Impatience was a problem for me, and I have yet to find a viewer who

could manage to listen to the entire tape recording at one viewing. I also had a problem with the idea of an artist putting so much into one person's life. Maybe the late Andy Warhol was right when he predicted that everyone gets to be famous for 15 seconds.

I find myself asking why, and not getting answers enough to justify the depth and the expense of this exhibit. Finally I felt the potential for exploitation of Milam and his life. To see Milam's simple, well used objects glorified in the glass boxes, and lit like ancient treasures, gave me a slight feeling of embarrassment. It all seemed undignified and over-indulgent somehow. Maybe we have in some ways found ourselves too separate from Milam, and we have put him, and his culture into a box too far removed for comfort.

In spite of these highly personal reactions, many parts of the show are lovely and revealing of a life honestly lived. Milam has lived with pain and injustice, and has rectified these indignities through his belief in God and in goodness. In another glass case Milam's old leather chair, his book of bible commentaries, and his glasses, evoke a studied and peaceable scene of a man finding his way through the days of hardship.

This exhibit is worth the trip, but plan on spending some time, or better yet, plan on seeing the show in two separate sessions. The exhibit runs through August 16. The museum is open, free to the public, from noon to 5 pm, Wednesdays through Sundays, except state and University holidays.

■ VIDEO

SCAN LINES Video Reviews by Sean Axmaker

Eugene Video Premieres

The movie game has some strange rules. One of them has to do with neglecting to release intelligent but hard to market films in favor of sex comedies and muscle bound adventures with Stallone and Schwarzenegger. Those audiences are easy to tap, but how do you attract a crowd to *At Close Range*, about a psychotic criminal who brings his sons into his business, or *'Night, Mother*, about a middle aged woman spending her last evening with her mother before killing herself?

That's where video comes in, a way to market the unmarketable and find an audience for films that won't play outside of the big cities. What follows is a set of short mini-reviews of some of the features which make their Eugene debut on videotape.

At Close Range

One of the best pictures never to make a Eugene screen is the true story of a criminal father who re-acquaints himself with sons from a previous marriage whom he charms with his lucrative career. A very intense Christopher Walken is the charismatic but spooky father and real life brothers Sean and Christopher Penn are the sons. Director James Foley hauntingly explores the relationships that develop in the course of the film, between Walken and Sean Penn, between sons and mother (and her boyfriend), and between Sean and his girlfriend Mary Stuart Masterson.

At Close Range shares much in common with this summer's *River's Edge*, from the quiet, backed off observational style and seemingly naturalistic photography to the frighteningly real characters and understated dialogue. *At Close Range* is disturbing and fascinating, a subtle, spellbinding character study with un-

nerving twists-and a powerful story.

'Night, Mother

Essentially a two person play, *'Night, Mother* is an unlikely film that works all right but is more suited for the stage. Sissy Spacek tells mother Anne Bancroft that she will kill herself that evening and prepares Mom for life alone. Mom attempts to talk her out of it, but Spacek's mind is firmly made up. Uplifting stuff, eh?

Acting is the highlight of this production and Spacek gives one of her best performances, though Bancroft is a tad overwrought. The writing is very theatrical and, though full of well turned phrases, doesn't seem right for film. It's an okay motion picture but you never get over the feeling you're seeing a filmed play.

Clockwise

John Cleese is the very punctual headmaster of a British public school who's about to receive the chair of an exclusive Headmaster's association when he boards the wrong train and his carefully planned out life begins to fray. The craziest situations develop as Cleese attempts to get the two hundred or so miles to the convention by coercion, kidnapping and grand theft auto, but the film is dry and understated (in other words, classically British).

Cleese is witty, attempting to maintain dignity in the wildest situations (which includes hitchhiking in a monk's frock!), and the film maintains an even pace, perhaps slow for American audiences, but consistently amusing. *Clockwise* isn't a laugh riot but I found myself giggling through most of the picture, particularly at Cleese's timing and gestures. My only problem was that the film elaborately got Cleese into trouble but ended

before getting him out.

The Men's Club

This is one film shelved for good reason—it's awful. A great cast, led by Roy Scheider, is wasted in a story of seven men who get together to discuss sexual hang-ups, fantasies and infidelities, and then head for a whorehouse to act them all out (one-upping the talky, pretentious but still far more intelligent *The Decline of the American Empire*).

The Men's Club tries to have it all ways. A roll call of clichés is marched out to show men being macho, playful, open and vulnerable, but never real. The men are allowed infidelities, then exonerated by their guilt in an attempt to let them have their cake and eat it too. Clumsy, hackneyed and embarrassingly whiny, this is the most self indulgent male fantasy I've ever seen take itself seriously.

Two by Stuart Gordon

When Stuart Gordon was directing theater in Chicago his productions were marked by a sense for the fantastic and the perverse. Now making low budget horror flicks, Gordon's taste for the bizarre hasn't changed, as can be seen in his first two films: *Re-Animator* and *From Beyond*, a pair of H.P. Lovecraft adaptations.

Re-Animator is the best of the two, a quickly paced, off-the-wall mad scientist story concerning a formula that brings the dead back to life (with horrifying consequences). Set in a modern medical school, the setting is rife with opportunities for black humor, which Gordon nicely takes advantage of. Energetic and clever, *Re-Animator* is full of bizarre ideas, strange twists and knock-out scenes, proving that creativity is more important than budget.

Alas, *From Beyond* pales in comparison. Great scenes and kinky situations spice up a story of inter-dimensional discoveries and a mad scientist's quest for power, but the pace is inconsistent and the story simply not as tightly developed as Gordon's first. Both films include nudity, violence and clever but grotesque special effects creations, but mostly they exhibit imagination gone berserk.

[Newsflash: *From Beyond* will be screened starting Friday in Eugene. See Now Showing.]

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